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Aug 28, 2003

Senator Pledges Aid For Coronet Study

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PLANT CITY - Residents who say something in or around Coronet Industries is making people sick have a powerful new ally.

After a quick tour of the phosphate processing plant, U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson promised Wednesday to press federal health and environmental authorities to help with an ongoing study of the area.

He wants the agencies to lend a hand to state and local officials who are trying to determine whether people who live near the plant are getting sick, and if they are, what is causing it. He also wants them to help clean up any hazardous waste that could jeopardize public health.

Hillsborough County Environmental Protection Commission Executive Director Rick Garrity welcomed Nelson's pledge to help push the federal government into quick action, although he said the federal agencies already have cooperated. County Health Department Director Doug Holt said an arm of the federal government is involved in the study.

Nelson said he would send letters today to the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Health and Human Services.

He will ask the agencies to expedite studies and lend expertise to the study of potential air, water and soil contamination. Residents complain that cancer is rampant in their neighborhoods, and officials have focused on the plant at 4082 Coronet Road and two old landfills near Park Road and Alabama Street as potential sources of pollution.

Nelson and Plant City Mayor Bill Dodson were given a private, 30-minute tour of the plant just south of the city limits. Nelson and Dodson said plant officials, including Manager Scott Davis and Vice President Chris Burgess, pledged cooperation.

"I don't think they had any choice but to be open because I'm going to get answers," Nelson said.

Coronet Neighbors Speak Out

Albert Franco, who lives less than a mile from the plant, said he was encouraged that Nelson was taking an interest. "I think that's great that we are taking it to another level," he said.

Franco was among about 100 people at an hourlong open forum Nelson held at city hall.

Others included Joanne Pugliese, a resident of the Oakview Estates subdivision near the approximately 100-year-old plant, which makes an animal feed supplement. The neighborhood got its water from a well until Plant City started supplying water in the late 1990s.



She worries the well water was contaminated and might continue to affect the health of residents.

"I personally have drank that water for 20 years," said Pugliese, who also said air pollution from Coronet's smokestacks settles in her neighborhood of about 200 homes.

The senator told those at the forum that environmental concerns such as the ones around Coronet are all too common in Florida. He cited a mound of dioxin in Pensacola and homes in Jacksonville built on top of ashes from a garbage incinerator.

He said Floridians are paying for the mistakes of earlier generations, when companies and government agencies either didn't know of the dangers of hazardous waste or didn't care.

Nelson Hopes Legislators Will Help

"What's happening here is symbolic of what's happening all over Florida and all over the country," Nelson said.

"If you think you have problems here, let me tell you, you're not alone."

Nelson said he hoped other senators would help him elicit a promise from the nominee for the head of EPA to make Coronet a priority. President Bush this month nominated Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt as EPA's new administrator.

"I have not had a pleasant relationship with EPA," said Nelson, a Democrat. But he said Senate confirmation hearings on Leavitt's nomination give him a bargaining chip to make sure Coronet gets attention.

Garrity said he hopes that with Nelson's help he can speed delivery of a hydrogen fluoride monitor the county wants to borrow from the federal government. Coronet emits hydrogen fluoride, a hazardous waste, from its smokestacks.

Although the discharge levels are not thought to be harmful, Garrity said his agency wants to check the emissions regularly.

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